

Scenes From East Timor

BY MATTHEW JARDINE

I left East Timor on September 4, 1999, only hours after U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced the results of the historic balloting there. Despite widespread acts of terror and intimidation by the Indonesian military and its militia groups, 98.7 percent of eligible voters cast their ballots and 78.5 percent opted for independence.

I was in a convoy of hundreds of cars and trucks heading to Indonesian West Timor. The convoy was made up mostly of Indonesian civil servants and their families fleeing in anticipation of an impending wave of terror. On the edge of Dili, the territory's capital, militia members armed with automatic weapons had set up a roadblock. They scoured our papers to ensure that no East Timorese were traveling with us. Indonesian police officers were present at the roadblock, and uniformed soldiers in trucks passed by. It was clear to all of us that the militias, the Indonesian police, and the military were all working together.

This was my fourth visit to East Timor in the last seven years. The first three times I went there to write about the occupation. But now I was an international observer accredited by the United Nations Assistance Mission to help ensure that the election process worked smoothly.

I arrived in July, and in many ways it was a time of unprecedented hope and political freedom. The National Council of Timorese Resistance, the umbrella group of all major pro-independence organizations, opened an office in Dili and in several other towns, where it held massive demonstrations. Such political expression was unthinkable in years past; anyone who engaged in it would

have been arrested, tortured, perhaps killed.

But alongside the exhilaration, there was another feeling, as well: fear.

"They've told us that they will kill us all if independence wins," Francisco told me two weeks before the vote as we sat in the front room of his modest home. Francisco and his family lived across the street from a post of Aitarak (Thorn), the local militia group, in a poor neighborhood in central Dili. The family, well-known supporters of independence, was under constant threat. Francisco's wife, Maria, rocked nervously in her chair, and she rarely raised her voice above a whisper. (Francisco and Maria asked that their real names not be used.)

Aitarak members carried machetes and automatic weapons around the neighborhood, and they sported T-shirts that warned of a "bloodbath" if East Timor's voters rejected continued association with Indonesia.

Such intimidation was pervasive. Just three days before the August 30 ballot, a group of armed militia members attacked and firebombed the office of the National Council of Timorese Resistance in the town of Lospalos. It took the police one hour and fifteen minutes to arrive on the scene, even though the police station is located only 500 yards away.

I had visited Lospalos in 1992, staying in the house of the local *liurai* (traditional king), Verissimo Quintas. A man in his sixties, Verissimo had survived Japan's brutal occupation of his homeland during World War II. He would not, however, survive the dying days of Indonesia's bloody colonial project. As part of their rampage against

supporters of independence, machete-wielding paramilitaries attacked his family's home and hacked him to death.

Indonesian forces and the militias connected to them killed hundreds, possibly thousands, of East Timorese in the days after the election. They systematically destroyed homes and offices throughout the land, and they kept up their terror even after U.N. troops arrived.

It was, in a way, fitting: The Indonesian forces left the way they came: savagely.

Indonesia invaded East Timor on December 7, 1975, with a green light from Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford, who had visited Jakarta just hours before. As a result of the invasion and occupation, more than 200,000 people—about one-third of the population—died.

But now, for the first time in twenty-four years, it is almost certain that East Timor will soon become an independent country. The East Timorese people have won a tremendous victory not only over the Indonesian military but also over its sponsors, the United States, Britain, Japan, and other Western countries, that have provided billions of dollars in military and economic aid to Jakarta since the invasion.

A sense of triumph was in the air as people bravely went to the polls, but a sense of trepidation, too. "It is the happiest day of my life," a woman told me near Dili's Santa Cruz cemetery. "But it is also my day of greatest fear. I've never been so afraid that someone is going to kill me."

When she found out that I was from the United States, the woman asked if the U.S. government would come to the assistance of the East Timorese, or if the United Nations would soon send troops. I told her I doubted that the United States would be of much help, and I doubted whether the U.N. peacekeepers would arrive in time to avoid the feared outbreak of violence after the vote. But after a week of terror by the

Matthew Jardine is the pseudonym for a U.S. writer who has worked with the East Timor Action Network. He is the author of "East Timor: Genocide in Paradise" (Odonian and Common Courage, 1999, second edition) and co-author of "East Timor's Unfinished Struggle: Inside the Timorese Resistance" (South End, 1997).

Indonesian forces and their militias—terror that was televised for all the world to see—the international community was forced to act.

For many years, East Timor seemed like a lost cause. Reports on East Timor in the corporate-owned press in the United States were almost nonexistent. From March 1976 until November 1979, for example, there was not a single mention of East Timor in the *Los Angeles Times*. This was during a period when the Australian Parliament Legislative Research Service described the situation in East Timor as one of “indiscriminate killing on a scale unprecedented in post-World War II history.” To learn about East Timor and U.S. complicity in the occupation, you were largely limited to the writings of Noam Chomsky, a handful of obscure books, or various leftist publications.

The mainstream media silence continued until November 12, 1991. On that day, Indonesian troops fired on a defenseless crowd of thousands gathered at Dili’s Santa Cruz cemetery to commemorate a young pro-independence activist killed by Indonesian troops. At the cemetery, Indonesian soldiers with U.S.-made M-16 rifles mowed down hundreds of mourners.

Unlike many previous massacres in East Timor, at this one Western journalists were present. Eyewitness accounts by Pacifica Radio’s Amy Goodman and activist/journalist Allan Nairn, combined with video footage taken by British cameraman Max Stahl, helped to ensure that the West would not be able to ignore the atrocity. The powerful reporting reinvigorated what had been a largely dormant international solidarity movement, which, in turn, heightened the scrutiny by Western governments of Jakarta’s illegal occupation.

I first went to East Timor in July 1992, several months after the Santa Cruz massacre. Indonesia’s military had launched a brutal crackdown on the resistance. The climate of terror was obvious as soon as I arrived in Dili, a picturesque city of 150,000. On the street, few people would even say hello. Military installations dotted the city.

“Do not trust anyone,” a Catholic priest told me during my first day there, adding that he feared there were spies in his own congregation.

A few days later in the town of Ermera, a seminarian told me that life under Indonesian rule was a hell. “We are slaves of the Indonesians,” he said. He introduced me to another priest, who showed me where spying Indonesian soldiers positioned themselves outside his house at night. The priest warned me that military authorities were watching us at that very moment and that they would later question him about our conversation.

I knew I was being followed, as unwanted



Thousands of East Timorese line up to vote on August 30 at a polling station near Dili.

ed “friends” frequently asked far too many questions. In the town of Aileu, intelligence officers compelled me to spend an hour and a half with the local military commander who, along with the police chief, interrogated me about my intentions. The English-speaking commander informed me that he had received training at Fort Benning, Georgia.

It was more than four years later before I returned to the former Portuguese colony. I arrived soon after the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize had been awarded to two East Timorese: Bishop Carlos Belo, the leader of the Catholic Church in the territory, and José Ramos-Horta, head of the diplomatic

wing of the East Timorese resistance. The award sent shockwaves through Jakarta’s ruling elite and gave a great boost to the people of East Timor. Internationally, the prize lent legitimacy to those working to end the complicity of Western governments—most significantly, the United States, which has long been Jakarta’s senior partner in crime—in Indonesia’s annexation of East Timor.

As my taxi left Dili’s airport in November 1996, I saw immediate evidence of change since my 1992 visit: On a wall near the airport entrance, someone had boldly spray-painted VIVA BISHOP BELO. In 1992, most East Timorese seemed too afraid to



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A resident of Liquica, East Timor, smiles as Australian soldiers in the international peacekeeping force rumble by.

make direct eye contact with me. This time, many people greeted me as I walked the streets of Dili. Some, particularly younger people, flashed a "V" sign for victory, a display of their nationalist sympathies.

Despite these openings, East Timor remained a place where few dared to speak their minds in public and even fewer dared to invite foreigners into their homes. "We are very happy that the world has recognized our suffering with the Nobel Prize," a middle-aged woman told me as we stood on a shady street, "but we still live in a prison." Our talk ended abruptly when a stranger appeared.

At the same time, a sophisticated underground resistance in the towns and villages continued to challenge the Indonesian military's authority. I saw this firsthand when I spent twenty-four hours with David Alex and ten of the 150 guerrillas under his command. Underground activists drove me to a rural safe house. From there, I was taken on a lengthy hike to the guerrillas' mountain camp. My transport in and out of the region relied on the cooperation of numerous people from many walks of life, exposing the hollowness of Indonesia's claims that the resistance was marginalized and isolated within East Timor. Seven months later, Alex was captured and tortured to death by Indonesian troops.

During a brief visit to East Timor in March 1998, the growing precariousness of Indonesia's occupation was even more evident.

Indonesia was in the throes of a political and economic crisis. There was a strong sense among the East Timorese that the end of Jakarta's colonial project was near.

With the ouster of longtime dictator Suharto in May 1998, Jakarta's desire to hold onto East Timor began to fade. In the following month, facing political instability, economic collapse, and intense international scrutiny, the Habibie government announced that it would offer the East Timorese "special autonomy." Under the plan, East Timor would run many of its internal affairs but remain part of Indonesia. While far short of what the East Timorese had been demanding, this was the first time that Jakarta would even discuss East Timor's political status.

Mass demonstrations quickly made it clear that most East Timorese rejected Jakarta's autonomy offer and instead insisted on their right to self-determination. Simultaneously, elements of the Indonesian military, fearing that East Timor would go independent and that this might incite rebellions throughout the archipelago, organized paramilitary death squads, or "civilian militias."

These militias soon began a campaign of terror against East Timorese with pro-independence sympathies, killing hundreds, including more than fifty refugees on the grounds of a church in the town of Liquica.

The seeming paradox was that the violence was occurring during a time of

unprecedented flexibility on the part of the Indonesian government. In January 1999, Habibie declared that he would grant independence to East Timor if its people rejected Indonesia's offer of autonomy. And U.N.-mediated negotiations between Indonesia and Portugal (still legally the administering power of the territory) resulted in a series of accords that led to the U.N.-run vote on August 30.

I hope to return to East Timor soon. But I am fearful for what I might learn about friends whose whereabouts are now unknown. At the same time, I derive hope in the knowledge that the East Timorese people may finally begin to build a society free from colonial control.

It will not be easy. Some of the militias—often thinly disguised members of the Indonesian military—remain, wreaking havoc. And the Indonesian military in West Timor poses a constant threat. On top of that, the East Timorese will have to reconstruct a society almost completely destroyed, in a physical sense, and one that has been traumatized by nearly a quarter century of terror.

In an increasingly globalized world dominated by multinational capital, one very hostile to alternative forms of political-economic organization, the East Timorese will surely face many challenges. But few people have as much strength to meet them. ■